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The Language Difference: Language and Development in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region

PAULIN G. DJITÉ

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English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: A Multilingual Model

ANDY KIRKPATRICK

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010, 236 p.

Dealing with Diversity: Language Policy in Southeast Asia

Two recent books on language in Southeast Asia provide a much-needed reminder of the importance of language as an object of study within Area Studies. Both books highlight the importance of conceptualizing language in a region as not only situated in different national and local contexts, but also operating across different embedded scales of social resolution. The policy and practice of language are interwoven from the regional to the national and local, coloring the social fabric of communication, symbolism and identity. While approaches to language policy have differed significantly across the region, there is a universal struggle between a stated respect for diversity and a more practical desire to impose national languages as a tool for maintaining national unity.

In *The Language Difference: Language and Development in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*, Paulin G. Djité offers a view on socio-economic development that is sorely missing from recent scholarship on the region. Choice of national language was a central question in the political struggles that took place as the nation states of the region were created. It can be argued that analyzing the historical processes of legitimizing, standardizing and institutionalizing national languages has produced some of the most important insights into the region's journey into modernization. However, Djité raises the call for a look at language in contemporary society, particularly with regards to how language policy and use affect the wellbeing of normal people in their daily lives—in essence a look at the outcomes of these post-colonial state building projects from a sociolinguistic point of view. The focus on the Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS), which itself includes a wild range of socio-economic development trajectories, holds high hopes for fresh insights into a complex set of socio-political language dynamics.

English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: A Multilingual Model, by Andy Kirkpatrick approaches language in Southeast Asia in the context of institutionalized and formalized regionalism. The book

highlights the importance of the relationships between English, national languages and local languages in language policy and language education. Not only the language of the ASEAN bureaucracy, English is the first foreign language in the educational systems of ASEAN countries, and is introduced in the early years of primary school. English has been widely accepted as the language of science and commerce, but the role of English in education policy more broadly has been much more contentious.

There has been much debate about whether the rapid spread of English as the global *lingua franca*, of which there are now more non-native speakers than native speakers, is resulting in or contributing to homogenization of the world's linguistic diversity and widening the gap in access to the benefits of the integrated global economy. Yet, as Kirkpatrick explains, there has never been a serious challenge to English as the working language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Malay (itself a *lingua franca* in insular Southeast Asian), French (a colonial language with some residual capacity in the ex-Indochinese nations) and Mandarin Chinese (the language of the economic future spoken by a large number of ethnic Chinese and others across the region) have been proposed as second working languages alongside English, but none has received any serious support.

Djité's work is a harsh critique of mainstream development, and the role that national language plays in creating barriers for the region's poorest and most vulnerable sectors of society. The author examines the policy and practice of education, health, the economy and governance and the role of language in each, targeting national governments and their emphasis on the national language. Although the analytical rigor of this framework and the argumentation are quite weak, the book raises several key questions that certainly warrant follow-up. For example, what can be learned from experiences with bilingual and mother tongue education among ethnic minorities in Cambodia and Vietnam? What is the significance of the use of multiple languages by marginalized people engaged primarily in the informal economy? How does dominance of the national language in the health sector exacerbate the disadvantaged position of communities that speak minority languages? Djité's decision to conduct a general survey based on macro-economic development indicators is unfortunate, as his integration of language and development is not compelling.

Interestingly, the book's focus is on the Greater Mekong Sub region, which first came into parlance as a program of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), but does not factor into the analysis the role of regional and global financial institutions in driving the economic development agendas that reinforce the national. In these development projects and programs one can see the tension between human diversity and the development prerogative. The ADB, for example, despite justified criticism of its projects' impacts on ethnic minorities, has continued to work towards social safeguards and guidelines to mainstream ethnicity and gender into its work. It should also be noted that the book does not address Thailand or areas of China that are included in the ADB definition of GMS.

Unfortunately there are enough factual errors and unreferenced assertions to cast some doubt on the credibility of the argumentation. For example, the section introducing the linguistic diversity of Laos is highly problematic in terms of accuracy, regarding for example the treatment of ethnolinguistic families and description of the Lao language. The unqualified presentation of dubious national statistics, such as the unlikely claim that Lao is spoken at home by 71 per cent of the population, in fact works to reinforce the misperceptions the author is seeking to critique.

Other mistakes and inconsistencies will trouble the reader. For example, there is discussion of the H'Mông language spoken along the Myanmar-Thai border. This is of course a mistaken reference to the Mon language, which lends its name to the completely unrelated Mon-Khmer family of languages. The term "H'Mông" itself is a Vietnamese usage, which is fine in the context of that country, but is employed by the author in the discussion of Hmong people in Laos as well. Needless to say, the landscape of ethnonyms is packed with political meaning, and these must be used with care. Attacking governments' insensitivity to the complexities of ethnolinguistic diversity with arguments that demonstrate a poor understanding of those very dynamics makes the impassioned call for social justice ring empty.

The real disappointment of this book is that it misses the opportunity to influence the people who should be its main audience: the policy makers themselves, at the national and regional levels. The copious assertions of the importance of language in governance are supported neither by compelling evidence to convince the nay-sayers of nation-state-driven economic development orthodoxy of the value of diversity, nor by constructive contributions on how this massively complex but critically important question can be better addressed. At the same time, it is not clear what a secondary audience, such as academic or development researchers, should make of it all.

The reader is left wondering about alternative approaches to this important and neglected area of inquiry. For such a topic, one might have considered focusing more on a follow-up of the gray literature coming out of development organizations and NGOs, where the real implications of the expected policy-practice gap play out. Focus on a certain aspect of language in development, such as education or health, from various levels of analysis would likely produce interesting results. One could even experiment with an alternative indicator of development that integrates language as a barrier/bridge to participation.

Shifting to the regional lens of analysis, Kirkpatrick does not limit himself to the institutional and policy issues that tend to dominate discussions concerning ASEAN. Instead, he provides an analysis of the English actually spoken among ASEAN delegates. He employs the concept of an identity-communication continuum, and concludes that the English of ASEAN falls clearly on the communication side of this continuum. That is to say, those delegates with higher degrees of fluency tend to adjust their language use to the group, prioritizing communicative effectiveness. Much of the localized English that is spoken around the region, such as Singaporean or Filipino English, is neutralized in ASEAN meetings, creating a shared register that maximizes mutual comprehen-

sion. He concludes that English works in ASEAN because it is used as a lingua franca, which by definition means that it exists alongside other vernaculars.

The ASEAN nations generally place high value on education in English, and many have experimented with shifting certain areas of the national curriculum to English instruction. Some countries are more aggressive in establishing a fast-track approach to English. Kirkpatrick sees this as counter-productive in terms of the quality of English learned, and at the same time as an unnecessary threat to the linguistic diversity that ASEAN policy claims to hold in such high regard. Coming from a pedagogical background, Kirkpatrick recommends a shift away from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) to ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) in education policy, which means the promotion of an English that is more culturally rooted in ASEAN societies and does not seek to emulate American, Australian or British varieties of speech.

One might question this idea as a move to institutionalizing “substandard English,” but Kirkpatrick’s point is precisely that ASEAN English is emerging as a legitimate, culturally-grounded language that serves its main communication purposes. If embraced as such, in the broader context of multilingualism, the pressure on coming generations to shift from local and national languages to English may be reduced and the functionality of English in its role as a lingua franca will be enhanced. Thus, policy promoting ELF would not only increase the communicative efficiency of interactions within the region; it would at the same time contribute to the development of a shared ASEAN culture, perhaps connecting the two ends of the communication-identity continuum. This is a thought-provoking proposition that suggests the importance of cultural forces in the processes of regionalization.

Both authors argue strongly for language policy that promotes diversity and against policy that marginalizes people. The importance of these calls cannot be stressed too much. Although the case for policy reform has been made, the focus on regional and national policy may also obscure the picture because it overlooks dynamic practices of language used at an everyday level by speech communities at all levels. In addition to looking at how governments “deal with diversity,” it would be fruitful to further explore how people “deal in diversity” in their daily lives.

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Water Rights and Social Justice in the Mekong Region

KATE LAZARUS, NATHAN BADENOCH, NGA DAO and BERNADETTE P. RESURRECCION, eds.
London and Washington, D.C.: Earthscan, 2011, 285 p.

My attention was immediately attracted to the book’s case studies of water rights and social justice